

*The Invisible Other and Symptomatic Silences:
Japanese Poetic Visions of the Colonial Pacific in the 1920s*

Toshiko Ellis

Copyright ©2013 Toshiko Ellis. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged.

Abstract: In the 1920s when the Japanese empire was pushing its borders outwards, a significant number of Japanese civilians moved out of the Japanese archipelago to settle in or travel through its newly acquired territories. The encounter with the foreign landscape and the people who lived there took various forms. Through the analysis of poetic images characterizing the poets' vision of "the other", this article examines the ambivalent nature of the experience shared by young Japanese poets as they faced the realities of Japanese colonialism. I focus particularly on the poetic works by Anzai Fuyue and his fellow poets in a journal called *A*, published in Dalian, a port city at the tip of Liaotung Peninsula, which had been handed over by Russia in 1905 following the Russo-Japanese War. The vision of these settler poets is then briefly compared with that of another poet, Kaneko Mitsuharu, who traveled through the port cities in the Southern Pacific. The stark contrast in their respective visions of the local cultures suggests the strong self-colonizing motive on the part of the settler poets, who were struggling to acquire a colonialist perspective while concealing their own colonial unconsciousness.

Keywords:

modern Japanese poetry, colonial/colonialist vision, Dalian

Japan is a country surrounded by oceans and seas. Since ancient times, the sea served the function of connecting and separating Japan from its surrounding lands. In this article I will focus on the 1920s and the 1930s, when the Japanese state was embarking on the attempt to advance into, acquire and control neighboring lands. As the state pushed its borders outwards, a significant number of Japanese civilians sailed out of the Japanese archipelago to settle in or travel through the newly acquired territories. They encountered new landscapes, and different peoples. Some went westwards to settle in the newly seized city of Dalian at the tip of Liaotung Peninsula, a port of entry into Manchuria (the puppet state

of Manchukuo was founded in 1932); others sailed southwards, to Shanghai, Amoi, Hong Kong, to the tropical regions of Singapore, and further.

From the perspective of the Japanese Empire, the sea served to connect the “mainland” (“inland”) Japan with its settler outposts, that is, the occupation of the sea routes signified the expansion of its dominance in the region. From the perspective of those who actually traveled across the waters, the sea signified something quite different. For some, especially for those who went to settle abroad, it was a reminder of the distance from their place of origin, which gave them a deep sense of alienation. This was not only because they felt distant from their home but also distant from the land, which had supposedly become their new “home”. For others, however, such distance gave a fresh vision of freedom; away from the bindings of the nation state and its principal forces, a premonition of encounters with the new and the unknown.

I will examine the poetic representations of these varying visions: what the Japanese settlers and travelers saw, or perhaps neglected to see, beyond the sea, when they encountered foreign landscapes and its peoples. The main focus of discussion will be the works of Anzai Fuyue and his fellow poets in a poetic journal called *A*, published in Dalian in the late 1920s. These works are characterized by a paralytic vision of the surrounding landscape, which reflects a sense of bewilderment and disorientation in the newly settled land. In comparison, I will briefly refer to some works by Kaneko Mitsuharu, who traveled through the Southern Seas and produced poems centering on the themes of rebellion against the growing empire and fascination with the local culture. I wish to explore the reasons behind the differences in their poetic representations, and extend the discussion further to examine the limitations and possibilities of cross-cultural encounters in a colonial or semi-colonial context.ⁱ

Anzai Fuyue moved to Dalian in 1920 when his father started a business in Dalian. He was twenty-two. Dalian, originally a small Chinese fishing village, was first occupied (as “leased territory”) by Russia in 1898. Here, the Russians embarked on a project to build a modern port city, planning the city based on the Parisian model. In 1905, following the Japanese victory in the Russo-Japanese War, this “leased territory” was handed over to the Japanese, who took over the building of the city, with the intention of developing this city to function as the entryway into the continent. This location marked the eastern end of a railway line that extended into the continent, formerly named the “East-Qing Railway”, and renamed the “South Manchurian Railway” by the Japanese when they took over its control from Russia.

Anzai, together with a few other young Japanese poets, published a journal called *A*, the thirty-five issues of which came out between 1924 and 1927. This journal is known to have played a significant role in starting the modernist movement in Japanese poetry in the non-lyrical, non-traditional style of the works published in them, characterized by the unconventional combination of images, somewhat resembling Imagist poetry. What I wish to highlight here is the way in which Dalian and its surrounding landscapes are represented in these texts. What are the characteristics of the poetic gaze? What are they looking at, and

what are they not seeing? And how are the poets positioning themselves in relation to the landscape?

Let us look at some examples. Here are some short poems by Anzai and his fellow editor/poet, Takeshi Takiguchi, which include images of Dalian.

There is no museum in this city.

It is like a man without lungs.

(“Dalian” [Dairen], A, no.16, Anzai)ⁱⁱ

The photo studio that hastily brought in civilization is looking decrepit in the landscape.

(The “street improvement” has already been launched in this toffee-coloured city.)ⁱⁱⁱ

(“The congested cityscape and civilization” [Shippi suru gaikai to bunmei], A, no.5, Anzai)

The message in “Dalian”, the first poem is straightforward. A city without a museum is a city without history, like a human being without internal organs. Similarly, the next poem, “The congested cityscape and civilization”, stresses how quickly the city has come into being, and is transforming, the new taking over the old. What we notice, here, is that this is not a lively new city, bubbling with energy.

The city is folded up

Banks go bankrupt, the canal is turning pale.

(“A cat” [Neko], A, no.16, Anzai)

Clouds

Many walls

The city, packed with dusty buildings coming upwards from the shore

(...)

(“A slope” [Saka], A, no.5, Takiguchi)

The city is ailing with fever

Pagoda

How far do I have to walk to get there?

(“Spring” [Haru], A, 4, Anzai)

As we read through the texts, we find countless images of things that are “pale”, or “dusty”. Or, as in “Spring”, it is sick and “ailing”. The weather, too, is almost always cloudy, with the sky looking dim and heavy. In short, the cityscape is dominantly pale, dusty and grey. This is quite contradictory to the image of Dalian promoted by the Japanese state, as the

symbol of Japan's advancement into the continent and a model city of Japan's modernization project. The reason for this, we can perhaps find, in the first line of "A cat", quoted above: "The city is folded up". In fact, we find numerous expressions suggesting that the city is "tucked away", "pressed" and "folded up", which are an unusual way to describe a newly burgeoning modern city. The suggestion here is that something is hidden, which you are not supposed to see. This sense of suppression, inhibition and the resulting image of the city being pale, dominates the landscape of the poems included in *A*.

Who, then, do we see in these poems? And how are they portrayed?

A city reflecting a mirage.
The lady disappears into the stone garden
(“The park” [Koen], *A*, no.18, Takiguchi)

New moon
A widow going down towards the subterranean railway
(“Postwar” [Sengo], *A*, no.15, Anzai)

An old woman holding a stuffy looking parasol. A distorted city spreading
below her eccentric skirt. (...)
(“City with an overpass” [Rikkyo no aru machi], *A*, no.10, Anzai)

Gas lights floating in the autumn wind – an old woman walking along the
overpass.
(“Autumn” [Aki], *A*, no.22, Takiguchi)

A girl with a light make-up is coming out from the basement – looking up
into the rainy sky.
(“Marsh” [Numabe], *A*, 19, Takiguchi)

A city embroidered with new green trees
A girl holding a cat comes out from the church
(“Canal” [Unga], *A*, 19, Takiguchi)

Strikingly, all we see are women. And we notice that they are consistently seen at a distance, in an “untouchable” distance, so to speak. In “The Park” the woman “disappears” into the garden, and in “Postwar” the widow goes down underground (this mention of the subway is interesting as there were no subways in Dalian at the time). The next two poems focus on a woman walking along the overpass. As suggested in “A city with an overpass” with the woman holding a “parasol” wearing an “eccentric skirt”, they are not Japanese, nor Chinese. This is clearly an image of a Russian woman. The demographic composition of Dalian at the time was approximately 77,000 Japanese, 123,000 Chinese and about 1,000 Russians (Nishizawa 1999, 47). The “widow” is probably the widow of the Russo-Japanese war. Strangely enough, there are no Chinese on the scene, though we know that the Chinese were the major labor force. It is said that there were approximately 20,000 Chinese, called “coolies”, working in the port areas. (Nishizawa 1999, 75) And the women – why are they

all so distant? And the girls, too, as we see in the last two poems, are not talking. It is only the poet's gaze that is inscribed, but the poet is not able to approach them, talk to them or touch them.

Before we conjecture the reasons behind the limited way in which people are depicted in these poems, let us look at a few more poems that look at the city from a distance.

It is lightly cloudy in the heights in March
The city in tiers, with its hills (...)
From this city near the sea, looking like a box
A spring train is approaching, whistling a tune
("Heights in March" [Sangatsu takadai], A, no.6, Takiguchi)

(...)
It is a rectangular city.
("A slope" [Saka], A, no.18, Anzai)

There is a port sending off raw silk.
The city is damply coming together, condensing.
("A port sending off raw silk" [Kiito wo tsumidasu minato], A,
no.4, Takiguchi)

Behind the windows up high at the hotel, is always the pale sea,

A beautiful old woman, having been forced a lengthy stay, looking out at the sea, was enjoying her afternoon sea dish. The sea was neatly fixed, in the bowls, in her lonely fingernails, and behind the glass frame. (...)
("The sea" [Umi], A, no.7, Takiguchi)

Thunder
A cat comes in the ladies' room
The city's pale roofs, roofs, and more roofs
("Twilight" [Hakubo], A, 9, Takiguchi)

What characterizes these poems is, once again, distance and detachment. In "Heights in March" – though in this poem it is unusually sunny – the city lies in the distance, "like a box". In "A slope" the city is referred to as being "rectangular". And in "A port sending off raw silk" the poet positions himself high above the city, looking down at the city's formation. In the last poem, too, the poet is seeing "roofs, roofs, and more roofs".

Commonly, in these poems the poetic self is looking down over the city from a point in the heights. What happens under the "roofs" is, apparently, irrelevant, marginal and inaccessible. In short, these are the views of a non-committal observer. Furthermore, the vision from the above typically suggests a sense of superiority. "The sea" focuses on a woman in a hotel room, once again, located somewhere in the hills. Whether this woman, who is forced a lengthy stay, is Russian, we cannot tell, but what is worth noting here is

that the sea is “neatly fixed” within the glass frame of the window, and distanced. This is symbolic of the nature of vision shared by the poets of the “A” journal. Regardless of whether there is a window or not, their vision is typically “framed”, as though someone is observing the outside scenery through a window. In other words, the views are regarded and invoked by viewers from the safety of their room. Filtered through the window, the scenes lose their vividness. They are predominantly still and static, and we hear little sound coming from these landscapes. The sea as viewed from the window of the hotel is absolutely quiet, or dead; it is deprived of the power to generate life.

That this is a projection of the state of mind of those who are viewing the scene is clear. This paralytic vision is no other than the psychological representation of the viewer, who is observing the scene from high above, or peeking through a window, unwilling to, or unable to venture out onto the scene and to become part of it. The sea is there, not to immerse oneself and to swim in, but to evoke in the mind of the poet a decisive sense of distance; that you are cut off from the world outside. And the sea is there also to remind them that they are somehow cut off from their original place of belonging.

In the late 1920s when these poems were written, the Japanese living in Dalian did not regard themselves so much as intruders, invaders or even colonizers; but rather, at least in their consciousness, they believed themselves to be “settlers” living in the land which had supposedly become an extension of Japan. The right to lease the land had been handed over from the Russians to the Japanese as a trophy of the Russo-Japanese War. What made it difficult for them to relate themselves to the land, however, was the fact that the land had been under the Russian rule for only so briefly, for a mere seven years or so, and that, it was originally a part of China, and that there were many Chinese, who demographically outnumbered Japanese residents. The Japanese “settlers” were willing to accept Russian heritage, including the use of European-style governmental buildings, many of which were still under construction, access to the railway and other facilities, but they were not equipped with the psychological means to deal with the Chinese locals. At least the fact that there is virtually no reference to the daily lives of the local Chinese people in these poems suggest that there was a psychological force at work to somehow “erase” them from the landscape. Interestingly, the Russians, despite the smallness of the number who stayed on in Dalian after the handover, are given relatively frequent appearances. Such inclination to “not look” at certain aspects of their everyday life explains the selectiveness of the images we find in these poems.

There is another dimension to the characteristic imagery of these poetic works related to the formation of the colonial/colonialist discourse of the time, against which Japan struggled to define itself. Japan embarked on its modernization project under the threat of being colonized by the West. In order to avoid colonization, it acquired and absorbed the principles of Western modernity, and through the process of avidly learning from the West and Westernizing/modernizing itself, internalized the ideology that justified the Western imperialist expansion. This process is commonly referred to as Japan’s “self-colonization”. Japan aimed to “mimic” the West, not only physically but also mentally, incorporating the logic of modernization, and acting, as if by its own will, like a Western state. This was a way to conceal its own incompleteness in its modernizing project, hence, the “colonial

unconsciousness” urging Japan to self-colonize, was tactfully concealed by the “colonialist consciousness” that urged itself to act in accordance with the norms of a Western imperialist state (Komori, 8-11).

The justification for becoming “colonialist” assumes the existence of the other upon which one could exert power. Thus, in order to uphold such colonialist consciousness Japan had to “discover” those who could be labeled as being “less civilized”. The first colonialist intervention took place in the northern island of Hokkaido, where Japan “discovered” the indigenous Ainu people as “barbarians”. As it incorporated these people into its own state system, it had to continue to “discover” further in order to maintain its presence as a modern power and to keep its colonialist consciousness alive (Komori, 19). This process intrinsically accompanied a sense of anxiety and an ambivalent sentiment towards the colonized, as in principle the process could not achieve completion but was put under constant pressure to continue “discovering” .

What we have seen in the poetic representations of the Dalian landscape is interesting in that they suggest an early stage of the making of this colonialist self and how it is underpinned by the self-colonizing motive. It suggests the kind of bewilderment experienced by these early “settlers”, who had not yet thoroughly internalized the colonialist logic of identifying and incorporating the other. The sense of uneasiness in finding their place in the landscape, and the resulting distancing of the objects of gaze are illustrative of the struggle experienced by the poets to define their relationship with the land.

The fascination with the exotic Russia, which we find in many of these poems, is also suggestive of the self-colonizing uncertainty of these poets. Initially, for Russia, the building of this city in a European style meant exhibiting its linkage to the European civilization: the development of Dalian was directly connected to the acquisition of the economic hegemony in East Asia (Nishizawa 1996, 46-50). Even though the city was still under construction when the Russians retreated, the basic plan of the city had already been laid out, with a circular plaza at its center and the wide roads leading outwards radially like the spokes of a wheel. When the Japanese took over the city, they were keen to keep its European appearance. They prohibited the residents’ dwellings to be built in wood and promoted the construction of brick buildings (Nishizawa 1996, 56). Eventually, Dalian developed into a city that looked, almost deceptively, European. To ensure the Japanese possession of the city, all the streets were renamed in Japanese, and every district, too, and all the transport and other facilities were given Japanese names. This entire process of building a city of European appearance and giving Japanese names to its infrastructure can be seen as a typical manifestation of a self-colonizing process. Such fervent desire to acquire a Western identity suggests, in turn, that such identity was yet to be sought; and yet, it was through upholding the pretense and façade of Western civilization that the Japanese sought to secure their place in this foreign land, which, in fact was neither Russian nor Japanese in its origin. This was a particular characteristic of settler Japanese at this time.

We can thus conjecture the reason for the recurring images of the Russian heritage in the poetic works of “A”. The Russian heritage played a significant role in the founding of the

colonialist subject. Having no resemblance to any other city in “inland” Japan, the physical European appearance of Dalian provided an environment that facilitated the Japanese settlers to assume a modern, colonialist identity. At the same time, it was a reminder of the artificial, almost fantastic, nature of this assumed identity. Exoticism features in these poems. The sense of distance as we have seen in the previous poems is suggestive of the uneasiness on the part of the poetic subject in identifying themselves with the object of gaze.

The virtual absence of the Chinese people in these poems can also be explained in this context. As mentioned previously, in the 1920s, before the Manchurian Incident, the position of Japanese “settlers”, particularly in relation to the land and its indigenous people, was only vaguely defined. The above poems reveal the poetic subject’s fascination towards this city abounding in European stylishness and its eagerness to establish himself as a modern subject. There was no room, then, for them to acknowledge the presence of those that did not fit into their imagery of this idealized modern city, the local Chinese, who, in fact, constituted the base layer of the life in this city. The living quarters of the Chinese were “tucked away” from their vision, hence references to the city as being “folded up”.

Lastly, then, why do we find only women in these landscapes? And why are these women predominantly “old”, or “girls”, who are potentially inadequate for having a productive, sexual relationship? Focusing on female characters is a typical mode of representation in genderized, colonialist writing: the presence of women is an immediate projection of the desire to possess the other. The characteristic images of women in the poems of A, who are either too “old” or too “young” – often widows or virgins – symbolically suggests that the desire is potentially there but that there is still a sense of uncertainty as to how to advance further, to “possess” them. There are numerous references, particularly with “girls”, of them being evasive, sometimes cunning, and expressions of a sense of bewilderment and hesitation on the part of the observer, who are not quite equipped with a means to approach them. The colonialist gaze is still in the process of being established (Ellis, 126-127).

In comparison, I will briefly touch on a Japanese poet, Kaneko Mitsuharu, who sailed out of Japan several times between 1918 and 1932, spending much of his time in the Pacific; in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, Jakarta, Java and other places, on route to Europe. He produced a number of poems set against the background of the port cities in the southern Pacific. Unlike those who left “inland” Japan to settle in the colonies, Kaneko expressed a willingness to embrace the identity of a cosmopolitan individual who was no longer bound by the constrictions of the nation state. Here is a poem written in 1925.

On the back of her hand
A number is tattooed.

Through the holes of her earlobes
Hang stones in the shape of a penis.

Eyelashes like ripe papayas
Around her sweaty body, the flies buzz around, or swarm.

I wish to be reborn,
Bathed in her desire, like the pouring tropical showers. (...)
("To a southern woman"[Minami no onna ni okuru], in *Lover at the
Roadside*, Kaneko Mitsuharu, 1925)

In contrast to the potentially colonialist approach we have seen in the A poems, Kaneko characterizes his relationship with the indigenous through a discourse of "love" and affection. He overlaps this with an anti-conquest discourse, and proclaiming and trumpeting freedom from the imperialist regime, openly hugs the woman, touches her skin and asserts the joy of achieving an erotic relationship. Though acknowledging that this kind of an illusion of cosmopolitanism, covered up by the discourse of love, is heavily orientalist in itself – as it is nothing but a self-complacent construction of the other – such approach taken by Kaneko and other Japanese traveler poets has a potential to agitate and disturb the colonialist discourse.

Let us look at one more example of Kaneko's work, which demonstrates a stark contrast in the way the poetic subject relates himself to his surroundings. Here, the poetic subject is floating in the sea water, amidst the corpses that have become what they are through fighting in the ruthless battles for no one knows what reason.

(...)
Piercing pain like mustard, confronting war that was hissing hot, they pulled
the trigger.
They were born to live, and had to do it all to live.
But, they died so easily, 'twas almost funny.

(...)
Their bodies, too, used to feel cold, and hot,
But now they are all full of holes, like lotus root, bits of flesh here and there,
the intestines flowing about, faces completely crushed.
It was so unexpected, they tilt their heads, the arm asks the elbow, the elbow
asks the next elbow, all so confused, "why did we become corpses, like
this?"

But no matter how hard they think, it's no use.
Through their skulls, making an empty sound, the muddy water flows.
The overflowing water says, -- "Forget it".

(...)
Big bubbles that come up through their noses.

Small bubbles that come up through their ears.
("Bubbles"[Awa], in *Shark*, Kaneko Mitsuharu, 1937)

This is one of the few examples of a poetic rebellion against the imperialist regime, written at a time when it was becoming increasingly difficult to critique the state of the nation, its

culture and the way in which language, including literature, came under the control of the Japanese imperialist state.

One point I wish to note at the end, however, is that there is a decisive absence in these poetic expressions, that is, the voice of those who were intruded, conquered and violated. The Japanese traveler poets were no doubt much freer in their frame of mind, to embrace the locals with affection, asserting their freedom to be what they wished to be, and content in their attempt to break away from the control of the imperialist ideology. We do not yet, however, hear the voice of the woman whom Kaneko yearned to “love”. How can we hear her voice, and the voice of all those who were gazed upon these settlers and travelers?

To conclude, I will quote a poem by a Korean poet, Yi Sang, the verbal construction of which is characterized by an overwhelming kind of intensity, suggesting tension and fear we have not observed in the works by Japanese poets of the same period. The following piece is entitled “Crow’s-Eye View”, not “Bird’s-Eye View”, the title itself suggesting the distinct darkness that dominates the text.

13 children rush down a street.
(A dead-end alley will suffice.)

The 1st child says it is terrifying.
The 2nd child also says it is terrifying.
The 3rd child also says it is terrifying.
The 4th child also says it is terrifying.
The 5th child also says it is terrifying.
The 6th child also says it is terrifying.
The 7th child also says it is terrifying.
The 8th child also says it is terrifying.
The 9th child also says it is terrifying.
The 10th child also says it is terrifying.

The 11th child says it is terrifying.
The 12th child also says it is terrifying.
The 13th child also says it is terrifying.
13 children have come together and are terrifying or terrified.
(The absence of any other condition would have been preferred.)

If one child amongst them is a terrifying child it’s all right.
If two children amongst them are terrifying children it’s all right.
If two children amongst them are terrified children it’s all right.
If one child amongst them is a terrified child it’s all right.

(an open alley will suffice.)

Though 13 children do not rush down the street everything is all right.
 (“Crow’s-eye view Poem No.1”, 1934) (transl. by Yu and Kimball, 5)

I will not go into a detailed analysis of this poem. I wish only to highlight the extent of tenseness filling this poetic space, the premonition of threat, the overwhelming “closedness” and desperateness as expressed in this piece, where the children, deprived of all that makes them human, and simply numbered, are running all in one direction towards a dead-end, or not running, or running to nowhere – or perhaps no longer there at all.

Works Cited

- A. Vol.1-Vol.35, Reprint of the original by Beppu Daigaku Bungakubu Kokubunka Kenkyushitsu, 1981.
- Ellis, Toshiko. “Tatamareru Fukei to Todokooru Manazashi.” *Gengo Bunka Kenkyu*. Vol.22, No.4. Kyoto: International Institute of Language and Cultures Studies, Ritsumeikan University, March, 2011. 119-129.
- Kaneko, Mitsuharu. *Kaneko Mitsuharu Shishu*, Ed. Takayuki Kiyooka. Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten, 1991.
- Komori, Yoichi. *Posuto Koloniaru*. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2001.
- Nishizawa, Yasuhiko. *Dairen Toshi Monogatari*. Tokyo: Kawade Shobo Shinsha, 1999.
- Nishizawa, Yasuhiko. *Manshu Toshi Monogatari*. Tokyo: Kawade Shobo Shinsha, 2006.
- Yu, Jung-yul, and James Kimbrell. *Three Poets of Modern Korea: Yi-Sang, Hahm Dong-seon and Choi Young-mi*. Louisville, Kentucky: Sarabande Books, 2002.

Toshiko Ellis is Professor in the Graduate Department of Language and Information Sciences at the University of Tokyo. She studied comparative literature at the University of Tokyo where she received her MA. From 1986 to 1992 she taught Japanese literature and culture at Monash University, Australia, where she received her Ph.D. She has been teaching at the University of Tokyo since 1992 and offers courses in comparative literature, Japanese poetry, translation studies and others. She specializes in modern Japanese poetry and has published extensively on Japan’s poetic modernism, and more broadly on issues related to modernism and postmodernism in Japanese literature. Her publications include *Hagiwara Sakutarō: Shiteki Imeeji no Kosei (The Poetic Imagery of Hagiwara Sakutarō)* (Chusekisha, 1986), “Questioning Modernism and Postmodernism in Japanese Literature” in *Japanese Encounters with Postmodernity* (Kegan Paul International, 1995), and “Literary Culture” in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Japanese Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

ⁱ Japanese names are written with the surname first, followed by the given name in accordance with the Japanese convention.

ⁱⁱ All the translations of the poetic texts cited are mine except for the translation from Korean into English of Yi-Sang’s text.

ⁱⁱⁱ This second line is written in small letters, in brackets.